

Dreiser Studies

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The Dream Life of Theodore Dreiser

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Sometime in his late forties, Dreiser began the practice of writing out his dreams. One of the earliest appears in his diary entry for August 3, 1919. There he introduced a dream in which “I was possessed of a key by the aid of which I was able to fly.” The dream “seemed to have a symbolic significance” that related to the strength of his creative powers, but Dreiser was unable to interpret its exact meaning.¹ Such reflections are in marked contrast to his pre-1917 diary entries, in which dreams elicit only a rare mention without any attempt to describe them or to ascertain their symbolic importance.

A similar change in the way Dreiser conceived of the dream state after the nineteen-teens appears in his fiction. In his first two novels, *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, dreams function as they do in his memoirs, in which he recalls how his German Catholic family understood the content of dreams: as visions of otherwise unknown events or as prophecies of what will happen. In Dreiser’s first novel, for example, Minnie’s intuition that her sister has “fallen” sexually comes by way of two dreams. The first dream describes Carrie descending into a coal mine pit; the second shows her slipping from Minnie’s grasp out over a rock by the sea. In contrast, by the mid-twenties, Dreiser created anxiety dreams for Clyde Griffiths, the source of which his friend, the psychoanalyst A. Brill, recognized as owing to the novelist’s reading of Freud.

Generally, the extent to which Dreiser absorbed Freudian concepts is difficult to gauge. In the matter of dreams, however, he was surely attracted to Freud’s emphasis on the “scientific understanding of dreams.”² In his few public statements on Freud, he mentions having read four works: the essay on Leonardo da Vinci, *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*,

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Totem and Taboo, and *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Moreover, it has long been recognized that Dreiser had Freud in mind as early as 1916 when he wrote “The Hand of the Potter” and that certain important works—including “Neurotic America and the Sex Impulse” and *An American Tragedy*—confirm his serious interest in psychoanalytic studies.³

Despite such evidence, most readers assume that Dreiser was at best an inconsistent Freudian and that his adherence to the bio-chemical mechanistic theories of Jacques Loeb and others seriously compromised Freud’s influence on him.⁴ When it came to dreams, however, Dreiser followed Freud’s belief that psychic activities rather than somatic processes are the major causative agents. Dreiser’s commentary on his own dreams, a number of which are published here for the first time, attest to the impact of Freud’s psychoanalytical model on his thinking.

These dream transcriptions illustrate the reasons why Dreiser spoke of his profound debt to Freud. In his address on the occasion of the psychoanalyst’s seventy-fifth birthday, Dreiser noted how his writing “came as a revelation to me—a strong revealing light thrown on some of the darkest problems that haunted and troubled me and my work. And reading him has helped me in my studies of life and men.”⁵

This “help” is evident in the record Dreiser kept of his dreams in the 1920s and 1930s. He gave each dream a coherent narrative form, and even titled some of them, as if composing a sketch or short story. For the most part, they seem to have been written directly after having a dream, though he did include a few that he had experienced years earlier. After his death, Helen Dreiser discovered them and sent the collection to the University of Pennsylvania, where they remain among the Dreiser papers. Those printed here are a representative selection.⁶

The dream narratives bear the imprint of Freud’s classical work on the subject. At one point in his commentary, Dreiser refers to his doing “dream interpretation.” Moreover, the theoretical assumptions he brings to his enterprise, as well as the symbolism he uses, follow Freud’s model. Several of Freud’s key ideas about dream analysis enter into Dreiser’s organization and presentation of his dreams. For example, the idea that “the

stimulus of a dream always lies among the experiences of the preceding day”⁷ finds its way into Dreiser’s prefaces to his dreams, in which he gives what he calls the “actual waking mental conditions out of which this dream took its rise and from which only its meaning could be extracted.” Dreiser also subscribed to Freud’s theory that at the center of each dream is a wish-fulfillment. When, as in several dreams, the frightening witch-like figures of old women turn into lovely young women who smile upon him, he comments that these seem to represent hope for the future, “to promise a rich harvest of some kind.” A striking feature of Dreiser’s dreams, in fact, is the pervasive optimism they reveal, as even the most anxious moments are often resolved positively.

Freud, then, convinced Dreiser that dreams expressed the hidden wishes of the soul. They opened the door to the secrets of Eros and the darker mysteries of Thanatos. As far as I know, Dreiser did not investigate other dream theories, and was either uninterested in or unacquainted with Jungian, Adlerian, phenomenological, or neuro-biological approaches to the subject.

Dreams for Dreiser were not a lifeline to the primeval, collective past or to the remnants of our primitive instincts. Instead, he organized the quasi-religious and heavily sexual imagery of his dream transcriptions around symbols that have become common in literary as well as psychoanalytical studies influenced by Freud. To take the most obvious example, phallic symbolism in Freud includes snakes, whips, and axes, all of which appear in Dreiser’s dreams in ways that at times make it seem that the dreams are themselves constructed around his reading of Freud. Freud did warn of the “secondary process” or “revision” that occurs when a person recounts a dream; the telling is, Freud insisted, culturally conditioned and never the same as the dream experience itself. For Freud this did not diminish the dream’s value as a source of self-knowledge. On the contrary, he held that the subject’s waking participation in the dream work brings him closer to the underlying meaning of the dream.

Dreiser’s transcriptions nevertheless do not meet the criteria of Freudian dream analysis. He left no account, for

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instance, of the free-association and interaction of analyst and dreamer that is the cornerstone of dream interpretation. Freud did offer practical rules for conducting dream interpretation without an analyst, but he warned that not every dream can be interpreted, particularly when the dreamer is the sole analyst. In any case, Dreiser did not undertake the exhaustive analysis that would have provided us with the *sine qua non* of dream interpretation as Freud formulated it: access to “the unconscious thoughts that lie behind the dream-content.”⁸ We are therefore limited to what Freud called the “manifest [or apparent] dream-content,” and can only speculate about its “latent [or hidden] content.”

Nevertheless, these texts do have some relation to Dreiser’s psychic life, and therefore they are valuable additions to our knowledge of the man. Apart from their intrinsic interest, they allow us to hazard some guesses about his cast of mind. My assumption, in this regard, is that sometimes a snake/sexual symbol is just a snake/sexual symbol. Also, for a number of these dreams Dreiser provides valuable information about the waking context of the dream. Dream #10, for instance, tells us something about his state of mind at a time in which he felt trapped in his early marriage to Sara White Dreiser. Others are transparently related to anxieties about the potential loss of his creative powers.

Given Dreiser’s strong libidinous drives, it is not surprising that many of these dreams are, at least on the surface, openly sexual, though the sexuality is not at all graphic. Nor is it particularized; rather it suffuses the dreams in the form of synesthetic images that are intensely sensuous. A striking characteristic of Dreiser’s dreams is the absence of men and the ubiquity of women. Moreover, the women who appear, with the exception of Helen Dreiser in one and a nameless sister in another, are not differentiated into individual, identifiable women. Instead they appear as archetypal figures, almost Jungian in their roles, ranging from witches and aged hags to gigantic snakes and “flower” children.

There is also an archetypal quality to the landscapes and animals in these dreams. (Interestingly, only one dream has an urban setting.) Mountain tops, paradisal gardens, misty

seascapes, the depths of forests, golden doves, plumed serpents—such images fill Dreiser’s dreams, giving them the feel at times of symbolist prose poems, or, as in the case of dream #4, a print by Blake. Some of them, particularly those which describe the “maidens” of his dreams, might have been the subjects of a Pre-Raphaelite painting. All these dreams point to an imagination shaped essentially by the cultural iconography widespread before the first World War.

There are also a number of less exotic dream narratives. The dream about Franklin Delano Roosevelt after the 1932 election (#2) reads like a wish-fulfillment dream of power. It’s worth recalling that in his twenties the shy Dreiser, who had a nervous fear of public speaking, had daydreams of running for office and, Whitman-like, made orators the object of his hero-worship. If Freud is correct in his belief that traces of earlier fantasies “play the part of dream-sources”⁹ in later years, this dream gives some insight into how long-standing (and full of conflicts) that ideal was for Dreiser. So too the threatening deathlike figure of a woman “all in black like a nun” (#3) might go back to his early fears of the black-robed nuns of his childhood parochial school days.

Such psychic traces from his youth also appear to enter the dream in which Dreiser is in the presence of God (#1). The unnamed woman (addressed as “you”) who merges with God and the confrontation with the “Jewish” Jesus may be a reflection of the oft noted tension between Dreiser’s powerful sense of the numinous and his violent reaction against organized religion. The Christ who appears as “the conventional figure we are all familiar with—brown beard, white robe and outstretched hand”—probably represents the forces of traditional religious belief. Dreiser’s way of deflating the importance of Christ—who seems in the dream to be a metonym for Christianity—is to attribute to Him traits of the anti-Semitic stereotype of the low-life Jew that appeared for this purpose in sources ranging from Nietzsche to the popular culture of the day.

Because of their fantastic elements, dreams often acquire a humorous edge in the telling. One instance of unconscious humor on the part of Dreiser is worth noting. Helen Dreiser appended a note to dream #7 : “This dream Dreiser had 1 month

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before he died. He told me of it the next morning. I had never heard or seen it in print before but after he died I found this copy in his effects when I was taking inventory. So he had this dream twice, once in 1934 & once in 1945.” The dream tells of Dreiser seeing Helen on a hilltop surrounded by pigeons. A younger girl approaches her and Helen runs and begins to rise from the ground with the birds. “She was posed statue-wise, something like Virgin Mary, with her arms folded, and about her were circling these birds.” The dream concludes with the other girl looking on in envy. Helen clearly took this as a dream that reflected Dreiser’s positive feelings for her. She may, of course, have been correct. However, the association with the Virgin Mary, a religious icon about which Dreiser was highly ambivalent, might have given her pause. If she had read Freud she would have been unhappy to learn that dreams of flying often signify a desire to escape someone or to have someone depart. And certainly if Dreiser had remembered such passages in Freud, he might not have been so eager to share this dream with Helen.

By their very extravagance, dreams lead us in many unexpected directions, and Dreiser has left behind a wealth of material for further commentary. In thinking about these documents, it might be helpful to recall Freud’s speculation about the dream accounts of writers: “In considering dreams recorded by a novelist or poet, we may often enough assume that he has excluded from the record those details which he felt to be disturbing and regarded as unessential. His dreams thus set us a problem which could be readily solved if we had exact reproduction of the dream-content.”¹⁰ I take this to imply that creative writers, in recording their dreams, will elaborate more extensively than others as they re-create the dream story on the page, thus pushing us further from its latent meaning. Dreiser’s highly wrought dream narratives give us cause to heed Freud’s words of caution.

Notes

¹ Thomas P. Riggio, ed., *Theodore Dreiser: The American Diaries, 1902-1926* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1982) 277-78.

² Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Modern Library, 1950) 3.

³ Ellen Moers is the critic who has had most to say about Dreiser and Freud, although she does not touch upon the subject of dream interpretation. See *Two Dreisers* (New York: Viking, 1969) 260-71; 284-89.

⁴ See, for example, Louis J. Zanine, *Mechanism and Mysticism: The Influence of Science on the Thought of Theodore Dreiser* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1993) 92-95; 108-112.

⁵ Theodore Dreiser, "Remarks, May 6, 1931," *Psychoanalytic Review* 18 (July 1931): 250.

⁶ The University of Pennsylvania kindly gave permission to publish these documents. The complete set are housed among the Dreiser papers in the Theodore Dreiser Collection at the Van Pelt Library.

⁷ Freud 55.

⁸ Freud 140.

⁹ Freud 100.

¹⁰ Freud 339.

1
DREAM

October 31, 1929

The setting for the dream was a vague expanse of nothingness—like standing on the shore line during a mist. GOD was front right and of enormous height and size—but especially of tremendous height and gave out the impression of colossal bigness—his legs especially were extremely long, being several stories high, and the whole figure overawed much like the huge Lincoln Memorial in Washington does. GOD's entire body was of a vapourish substance, but clearly defined and set out even against the misty background.

You, then, were of a cloud-like substance also, but grayer than GOD, except that your hair was actually white—that is had body and substance as contrasted with the extreme grayish pallor of your flesh and you were at least one and a half times as tall as either I or Christ, who was standing at my side—right. In

person Christ was the conventional figure we are all familiar with—brown beard, white robe and outstretched hands. Now most all of the dream was psychic rather than tangible—i.e. you standing in front of and right next to GOD seemed to float or merge into Him and your extreme height added wonder to the vision. I was seemingly psychically aware of this slow merging of the two bodies, as was also Christ, but the difference was that I seemed to think the act very fitting and was viewing it solemnly as a rite, whereas Christ tried in every manner to prevent your merging with God—not frankly or outspokenly, but oilily trying to find a way in which he could inveigle you out of this fusion—he became jealous and unhappy. It also appeared that He realized that I was expecting Him to be superior to petty jealousy—whereas in reality he was very unhappy about your intimate connection with God and wished to put an end to it without openly coming and showing his emotion. And it *did* seem that you were taking Christ's place with God and he was desperately trying to manoeuvre it somewhat so that this very thing might be prevented. All of this was felt rather than given voice to.

I, all the while, stood by, covertly aware of and laughing at His discomfiture—finally explaining it to myself—“Well, He just can't help it—that's the Jew in Him! My mental vagaries and comments to myself are even now extremely clear and distinct. It seemed I was a privileged spectator and that Christ's motives were very clear to me and His Jewish discomfiture and uneasiness extremely amusing.

P. S. I think the merger went through.

2

I had this dream in November, 1932, about ten days after Roosevelt had been elected President. I was on the road from Nashville to New York and was spending the night in a small town hotel in eastern Tennessee.

I felt that I was standing on the sidewalk of a very large square—something like one of the commons in our New England towns. The reason that I emphasize this is that the surroundings were those of a very respectable New England

village colony, charming houses, beautiful trees and grass and flowers and well laid sidewalks. The roadway in the center was very wide—perhaps all of two hundred feet—and as I looked it was occupied from end to end of the common by a very grandiose procession, such a procession as personally I have never seen anywhere in the world. It consisted of men and women apparently to the number of several thousand, all compactly gathered about a raised platform which was either on wheels or was being carried by individuals, but I really think it was being moved along on the body of one or more automobiles. This platform was covered completely and richly with velvets and silks as well as some American flag bunting draped around a low center pulpit in which was a man, who looked very much like Franklin D. Roosevelt. However, over his shoulders was a robe such as college presidents wear, only in this instance it was also of a dark blue velvet with gilt collar and cuffs. Roosevelt, if it were he, had his head flung back in the characteristic manner in which he was accustomed to orate and seemed to be talking fluently and enthusiastically, not so much to the mob below but to space in general. He was waving his arms and seemed highly pleased with himself and with what he was saying.

Below, as I have said, were these several of thousands of men and women, but they appeared to consist of dignitaries and men and women of means and power of all orders. For instance, there were many officers of the army and navy in the richest of uniforms. Also there were priests, bishops, cardinals, rabbis, ministers, presidents of colleges, women leaders of organizations and many officers of well-known secret organizations, such as Masons, Knights of Pythias, and Knights of this and Knights of that—all except the army and navy officers, in the richest of robes of velvets and silks and satins,—the women with sashes over their shoulders and about their waists and all turning and straining to observe the speaker. At the same time that they seemed very much concerned to press closely against each other, the while they moved either from east to west or north to south along this public common.

In my dream it came to me that this was obviously an assemblage of all the successful in the world of finance, politics,

religion, officialdom, the navy and what not. It was so much so that I was rather startled to think it was so completely delimited in this fashion. But after staring and obtaining the complete quality of it, I turned, and on a side road turning into this common at the further end, I saw throng after throng of identically the same characters, only in each case separated by a little space, and yet in each case crowded about a similar platform, bearing a similar figure, orating in a similar fashion, only in each case the speaker was of a different character. They varied for instance as Mussolini from Hitler, Hitler from Pilsudski, Pilsudski from Stalin, Stalin from Dolphus, but in each case the uniforms, the robes, the insignia, the standards and the large wealth of color of the mass was of precisely the same quality and in each case the central figure was orating with the same enthusiasm and satisfactions.

Looking at this it came to me in my dream that what I was seeing was a symbol of something that was to come—the grouping of the strong and the successful about these dignitarial figures or leaders throughout the world. I said to myself, “How strong and in a way how dreadful, for not in one of these groups is a single common individual, a single worker or member of the mass.” Then I turned to go, and in doing so found myself in a gully which was apparently the only side path or exit path that I could find, and as I turned into it I found that under my feet as I walked were billions and billions and billions of ants, all struggling and pressing for movement and life along this gully, and that my feet as I walked were crushing them down as anyone walking would crush stones or ants. I could feel masses of them yield and flatten under each step that I took. With a kind of horror of untamed destruction on my part, I awoke.

3

At the time of this dream I was forty-four years of age, living and working in a studio in Greenwich Village and reasonably satisfied with my program and my life. Nevertheless, I was greatly troubled by the mystery of life, the strangeness of one's ambitions and peculiar temperament and the uncertainty of worthwhile fulfillment in any direction.

About two in the morning as I was sleeping in my bedroom, there I had this dream—

I was standing in what appeared to be an open oval of grass entirely surrounded by a thicket of trees all green and all dark, but where I stood was light, and out of an arched pathway that traversed the thicket to the South, I saw suddenly and somewhat to my fright, an aged, bent, bony and hooded figure of a woman, all in black like a nun but the clothes ragged and worn and dusty. Her head was bent low over her narrow chest, and yet I seemed to have had enough of a glance at her features to satisfy me that they were almost those of a skeleton.

Very slowly and wearily she appeared to drag herself along this path and out of this shadow toward me, and along a narrow path that led past me into the thicket beyond. As she approached I was conscious of a peculiar, and to me amazing, change, for the nearer she came the less angular and less worn, the less ghostly she appeared. By the time she was opposite me she was a fairly full-bodied woman of forty, the garb she wore was anything but ragged and by now a pale gray. Her head was up and her step vigorous. Yet she passed without looking at me and I turned to observe her steps as she went quite as slowly as she came. She approached the thicket at the further end, but as she did so, she grew younger and younger. The grey nun's costume became the Springtime garb of someone bent, in high spirits, on a garden party. She grew younger and younger. The hood that had been over her head had disappeared and now there was a golden head with a perfectly lovely Grecian profile, and her stride as well as the movement of her bare arms and fingers, indicated the spirit of one who was in the hey-day of youth and health. As she came to the edge of the thicket and was about to disappear into it, she turned and visited me with a friendly, kindly, gay and enticing smile. Then she disappeared into the forest.

4

January, 1929

First, a golden bird—a burnished golden dove or eagle, flying direct to the center of an apparently early morning sky

from its horizon and poising there. Then beneath it—or it giving way to this second apparition and apparently in the same place, a child—a girl of six or seven, kneeling and looking up to where the dove was or had been and with the reverent expression of one praying or imploring. Immediately afterwards the disappearance or displacement of this girl by a four or five-day old baby, also of burnished gold, in a burnished gold cradle—all light giving. Lastly the cradle and child replaced—and instantly—by an entire sky of golden fruit, apples, oranges, pomegranates—lustrous, fecund—seeming to promise a rich harvest of some kind.

5

July 20, 1934

I was sitting in the double parlor front and back type of American Brown-Stone residences of the type that were very common in New York and Chicago thirty years ago. The front and back rooms were filled with people, evidently gathered to discuss or consider something, and yet all of them acting as though they were waiting for whatever it was or whoever it was which was to appear. I noted a preacher or two, a doctor, professor, some women, who looked as though they might be members of literary and reform societies. In other words, a typical intellectual drawing room gathering.

As I studied these people and meditated on their characteristics, I slowly became aware of myself. In a row on either side of me—men and women—I was completely naked except for a book which I had in my hand and once I became aware of the fact that I was naked I next became aware that the other people in the other two rooms were conscious of the fact also. People were looking here and there. I could see them move their heads and look when I wasn't looking. The preacher across the way after a time appeared as though he would say something in protest. Other people the same. Noting that I began to think of why it was that I was there naked and if a protest was made, what I would say—what explanation I would make as to how I came to be there. Throughout all this waking to my state, I was not personally troubled very much at all. It

rather seemed that I had ventured there in this way for some purpose, exactly what I was not quite sure myself, but just the same just before I awoke I was saying to myself "Well now, if they protest, how will I explain this?" And then I awoke.

6
THE LIGHTHOUSE

I dreamed that I stood by the edge of a body of water. Opposite me across an inlet I saw a great lighthouse. Its base was large and white and its great light revolved over the dark water. And near the lighthouse I saw a great shipyard and many ships anchored in the water. Their masts were tall and rose up crowding the sky like so many trees. There was an air of prosperity and well being about the whole scene. The ships were so clean and bright, the lighthouse so strong and its light so powerful, a refuge. And then I looked across the water and I could see the faint outlines of a village, or waterfront. From where I stood at the time I could not make out the character of the buildings.

But then all at once the lighthouse began to fall. It fell slowly, its great height bending until it was completely uprooted and lay across the water like a floating bridge. The light was extinguished and it was dark. I then started to walk across the bridge thus formed and when I came to the other side I found myself in the village whose outline I had seen before. But now I saw that this waterfront town was deserted, the buildings wretched, boarded up, gray, the wood spongey and decayed. I was extremely depressed as I wandered around the silent, empty streets. There was an atmosphere of suffering and despair about the place.

And then once more I was beside the place where the lighthouse had stood. There was an empty square of ground there, and lying in this square I saw a horseshoe to which was attached a leather thong. I stooped to pick up the horseshoe and swung it by its leather thong. "This is a horseshoe," I said. "It will bring me luck." But then as I said the word I wondered. What was luck? Was there such a thing? Did it mean anything at all? And feeling suddenly that I was foolish to count on it, I

threw the horseshoe away. And just as I did so, I awoke.

7

This was a hilltop or rather the top of a long ridge. It was morning. The sky was a sort of milky blue. There was grass and young trees and it seemed as though it might be early spring or perhaps May. My position in the dream was this:

I stood to one side of this ridge line looking at the sky and the trees, when suddenly I saw Helen standing in one place rather directly in front of me at the top of the hill and about her were a few pigeons on the ground. Then next I noticed a younger girl, somewhat darker. She was to the right of Helen—as Helen and she stood facing me—perhaps as much as twenty or thirty feet distant from her. She appeared to be intensely interested in her and evidently started to approach her when suddenly Helen began to run to the left along the ridge of the hill toward some trees that were in that direction, and as she ran suddenly she began to rise from the ground and the birds that were about her rose with her. She ascended rapidly in the air, and as I followed her with my eyes she rose directly over the spot where she stood only now hundreds of feet in the air. She was posed statue-wise, something like Virgin Mary, with her arms folded, and about her were circling these birds. On the ground below stood the other girl looking up at her in apparent wonder and surprise and possibly a little envy.

8

In my mind, at the time that I had this dream, was a very vivid and magnetic but dishonest and cruel temperament of a young Hollywood star. The contact of something of six months had proved painfully disillusioning and at the time of the dream I was in receipt of long emotional self-exculpatory letters full of declarations of undying affection and devotion—

I was walking toward the summit of a level-topped grass-covered mountain of great height. It was morning—here was light—the sense and beauty of freedom. As I entered on the topmost level from a lower plain, in the grass in various

directions I saw short figures and flat nosed snakes, the poisonous kind, but as I approached toward them, one after another lifted its head and then ran away. I had chased most of them and apparently frightened them all away, when I turned and saw a snake of really great size, perhaps six inches in diameter and seven or eight feet in length. It lifted its head menacingly and seemed on the verge of attack. Curiously at that moment I found in my hand one of the long looped whips of a cattle rustler, of a length from handle to snapper, of something like 30 feet, maybe more. Throughout my life I had never even handled a whip of this kind, yet in the dream at this instance I found myself a perfect master of it. Looped in my fingers, the handle firmly in my hand, I aimed it at the snake's head, and on every occasion that it lifted its head and seemed about to move toward me, I struck it so exactly that after a number of blows I seemed to have severed the head from the body.

9
THE WOMAN

I dreamed that I was standing on a path in the middle of a woods. It was narrow and winding and as I stood there looking around me I perceived a figure walking along the path quite a distance from where I stood. It was coming in my direction and at first sight I saw that it was a woman old and bent. I could even see that her skin was wrinkled and coarse, her hair dirty; and the ragged cloak in which she was wrapped made her appear witch-like and fearful. I shuddered involuntarily and wished to turn from the sight of her.

She was walking very slowly and some power made me stand and watch her approach. And lo, as she came nearer and nearer I saw that she very gradually became younger. Her figure began to straighten out, her cloak began to take on graceful folds, and by the time she had reached the place where I stood on the forest path, she was erect and strong. She then appeared to be a woman of about thirty-five. She no longer repulsed me but rather commanded my respect by her bearing and the grace of her figure.

However, she paced slowly past me along the path opposite

the direction from which she had come. And as I turned and watched her I saw that the farther she got from me the younger and more beautiful she became. Until, just before she turned a bend in the path I saw that she was a most beautiful and queenlike girl, more beautiful than anyone I had ever seen. At the very last, just before she disappeared, she turned and gave me a winsome—almost beaming—look—and then I awoke.

10
THE GARDEN

I was unsatisfied with my married life but unfortunately there did not seem to be any way in which I could escape from it. I looked ahead into the future and despaired. One night before I fell asleep I was thinking on my state and then finally I slept, and dreamed. In my dream I found myself standing in the middle of a garden. As I stood there looking around me I saw the plants in the garden growing larger under my eyes until all around me there was a beautiful array of flowers. And as I looked at them I saw the petals of the blossoms for the faces and heads of girl children, infinitely beautiful. And then I awoke. As I regained consciousness I was filled with wonder at my dream. Surely it had been sent as a promise of some future escape from the problem of my marriage. But then the flowers had formed the faces of very young girls, children of the ages between ten and thirteen. I was not satisfied.

I fell asleep again, wondering on this dream, when I had a second. Once more I was in the garden and once more the flowers began to grow, the faces to form and to my delight I was surrounded by flower faces of beautiful girls evidently seventeen and eighteen and nineteen years of age. And once more I awoke. As I lay in my bed marvelling at these dreams I was strangely comforted. How beautiful the gardens had been! How beautiful the faces of the flower girls. And so I resigned myself hoping to fall asleep again and dream still further of this wondrous vision.

But that was all. I never dreamed again of the garden of girls.

11

The actual waking mental conditions out of which this dream took its rise and from which only its meaning could be extracted were as follows—

Three years before this occurred, I had, quite accidentally and against my wishes at the time, encountered and to a very definite degree become, hypnotized by an artistic temperament such as I never really encountered before. The girl was a pianist, a poet, an actress and a gay and fascinating lover of life all in one. At the same time she was greatly admired and pursued, and knowing this, for entirely a year and a half I had avoided her, although there had been several purely accidental contacts.

Suddenly, however, because of an accidental contact in a resort in Coral Gables, Florida, I was fascinated by her. She was then in the company of a distinguished young architect and engineer who was planning work for some Florida organization, and, as I could see it then, he was far more hypnotized than I. Later because of conversations we had either in her suite or his, or on the beach, I became aware of the reaches of her mind, and to my astonishment found myself suddenly helplessly fascinated. Naturally, because of her affair with the other man at the time, I did not believe in the worthwhileness of anything serious. At best it could only be a temporary affair, and I admired her admirer so much I was absolutely opposed to interfering. He was too interesting and too attractive himself. Nevertheless, some music that she played, some poetry she recited, a Greek lyric tragedy in which she appeared, brought about a very sudden and violent change, and I wished then to possess her for myself, and for some six months thereafter in New York and other places, I saw a great deal of her.

All that time and in spite of various protestations made by her, I was conscious of the fact that I was a mere figure among many. She was really too clever to permit me to possess myself of exact details, and personally she would admit nothing, protesting always her proud enthusiasms. Just the same, instead of being happy, I found myself unreasonably unhappy and

becoming uselessly and futilely suspicious and quarrelling and then lending myself to regretful apologies and reconciliations which seemingly only led to further suspicious jealousy and quarrels.

Finally, after six or seven months of this, I personally decided that I was not doing anything for myself or her, and I departed, and for a long time thereafter was pursued not only by letters from her, but was tortured by romantic and unsatisfied desires of my own in connection with it—so much so that for a time I decided to leave the country to see if I could not work elsewhere in the hope of breaking the spell. It was at this time that this dream occurred—

I was in the home of a sister of mine, who was financially dependent on me, and this particular house and all that was in it and all its financial understructure was arranged for by me—so that in the dream at least, it could be looked upon as my property, accurately representative, for instance, of my mental and individual independent freedom. In the dream, for purely allegorical reasons apparently, I was saying to my sister, who evidently had said something to irritate me, “I want you to know that this is my house—everything in this place belongs to me. If it were not for me, it would not be here.”

And in answer to that my sister looked at me as much as to say, “Yes, that is true.” Naturally, that is nothing I would have said in real life—its only fact was a dream.

Immediately following this statement I noticed that the fire place, which was in the background, required some wood and I went out of the door, out on the porch and then a step toward a wood block, on one side of which was some wood which could be cut to length with an axe, and the axe itself was struck into the wood box so that it was held there. As I approached the wood block and was about to seize the handle of the axe in order to cut a section of the wood, I noted on the top of the block the famed plumed serpent of allegory and religious history. It was black—not more than 30 inches in length—beautiful in form, and with this magnificent plume like that of a peacock right above its eyes. As I approached I saw it look at me with sort of a savage determination to stay. Then suddenly when I seized the axe with the intention of striking it, it leaped into the grass

and disappeared. Only as it disappeared I saw the grass waving where it ran and it ran out of the grass and on to a ledge which approached one side of the house out of which I had just come and there it paused and turned and looked at me, and as it did so I had a most troubled feeling that it represented the girl whom I have described, only in connection with it at this time there was anger, defiance as well as a certain obvious attraction toward me, so much so that suddenly and defiantly it turned and ran back into the grass and evidently, as I could judge by the movement of the grass close to the block from which I had just driven it.

I was frantic, because of the dream, feeling that it was vitally poisonous, and axe in hand I leaped to one side, at the same time raising the axe over my head in a defensive position. Then standing so I awoke.

Curiously enough I was startlingly awakened by this dream. I could not, for instance, explain the rather simple house in which I had stood, and concerning which I had determined that this was all mine, until after a time I identified it really with my own temperament as being a dream interpretation of my own independent individuality about which I was so sure. That is, that I was in full possession of my individualistic powers. But previous to this dream having never heard of let alone read anything regarding a plumed serpent I was curious over it and kept wondering about that for months, until one day I picked up a volume of short stories by D. H. Lawrence which was entitled "The Plumed Serpent" and all of which related to love. Later I found that the plumed serpent was old in religious sympathies, signifying creative power.

With that knowledge in hand my mind immediately returned to this particular girl and that fearsome, really almost destructive hypnotic power of her feminine and sexual charm, and with that I identified with part of the possible thought in her mind that if she chose, and for all my individualistic temperament and my opposition, to continue with me, that she could if she would, return and strike me down.

Dreiser and Schopenhauer: The Concept of “Desire”

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The problem of deep and complicated interconnections between American and European thinkers and writers, though important, has not been thoroughly investigated by modern critics. In this respect Theodore Dreiser's views, his works, and personality all command great interest. Dreiser was deeply involved in studying European philosophers “of the first rank,” as he called them—Spencer, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer (*Life, Art, and America* 252). From this point of view Dreiser's *Trilogy of Desire* is of special interest because it incorporates not only Herbert Spencer's and Charles Darwin's ideas about the struggle for existence in nature and society (a fact unanimously acknowledged by the critics), but also some aspects of Arthur Schopenhauer's concept of life as eternal “desire.”

Taking into account Dreiser's great passion for Schopenhauer's philosophy, this essay examines some important aspects of the trilogy that remain neglected in modern scholarship about Dreiser. Looking through a Schopenhauerean lens will permit us a more profound understanding of Dreiser's famous novels and enable discussion of aspects that have traditionally been looked upon as problematic.

In Theodore Dreiser's novels the theme of desire personifies both social and psychological processes characteristic of American society at the beginning of the twentieth century. He considered desire as the egoistic orientation of a person to satisfy his own needs and achieve his purposes. In this respect, desire becomes central in Dreiser's *Trilogy of Desire*, determining Cowperwood's requisite “motto”: “I satisfy myself” (*The Financier* 121). Dreiser's

contemporary Randolph Bourne in his 1915 article devoted to the trilogy entitled “Desire as Hero” observed that Dreiser’s hero was “really not Sister Carrie or the Titan or the Genius, but the desire within us that pounds in manifold guise against the iron walls of experience” (244).

For Dreiser’s heroes, “desire” is embodied in their search for beauty or the love of a perfect young woman. But their desires are never sated. Depending on what an individual needs most, he may long for wealth, love, power, or glory. Thus, desire becomes an integral part of human existence and the loss of desire means non-existence and leads a person to disappointment and death.

The theme of desire dominates the first two novels of the *Trilogy of Desire*, written in the first decades of the twentieth century—that is, just at the time when, according to the writer’s biographers, Dreiser was especially interested in Schopenhauer. Richard Lingeman mentions that in the nineties, when Dreiser arrived in Chicago, he discussed with a Dane, Christian Aaberg, works by different writers and philosophers including “Ibsen, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer” (*At the Gates* 74). Later on in the first decade of the twentieth century Dreiser “toughened his mind by reading philosophy—Schopenhauer, Kant and others” (*At the Gates* 384). This notion is supported by Lawrence E. Hussman who adds that Dreiser read “two German thinkers”: Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. “Dreiser read Schopenhauer around 1900. The philosopher’s concept of man as concrete craving meshed with the novelist’s own self-evaluation and his observation of most others.” Dreiser “found Nietzsche less consistent and original than Schopenhauer” (70).

The problem of desire occupies an important place in Schopenhauer’s philosophy. He develops his concept of desire as the main principle of people’s existence. The unrestrained, incessant desire of a person to achieve fortune, enjoyment, and pleasure, the philosopher asserts, is the driving force behind the will to life, or “the inner essence of every phenomenon” (Schopenhauer 112). By obeying his “desire,” “wish,” or “aspiration,” all of which embody the world will, each person turns his life into an indefatigable pursuit of happiness and

success. Will, according to Schopenhauer, inevitably begets new desires and with them new privations and never-ceasing dissatisfaction. Eternal aspiration, the essence of any display of will, grounds itself in a living body. Each person represents an entire desire, an entire need, an interlacement of thousands of requirements.

Dreiser's heroes are ruled by desire. In attempting to satisfy their desires, they rush forward through life, without rest or happiness. Their joy is fleeting and elusive, for happiness comes only by chance and can disappear at any moment. Thirst for enjoyment and delight becomes a source of new disappointments. Even fulfilled desires do not bring satisfaction to Dreiser's heroes.

Some critics, for example Randolph Bourne, connect Dreiser's theme of desire with the influence of Freudianism. "What Mr. Dreiser has discovered is that 'libido' . . . was nothing more than the scientific capturing of this nineteenth century desire," Bourne writes. "You may come away from the Freudians and the Jungians chagrined at the technicalities and horrified at their phenomena, but you can scarcely deny that they have found and interpreted a central leitmotif of our human living, which is immensely to illuminate our understanding of ourselves and the world about us." What Mr. Dreiser seems to me to do is to give us a crudely impressive fictional portrayal of this motive" (244).

The enthusiasm of European and American intellectuals for psychology and such parapsychological phenomena as hypnosis, telepathy, and spiritualism was characteristic of Dreiser's epoch. It is quite natural that this interest penetrated philosophy and literature. Dreiser also displayed deep interest in psychology and psychoanalysis. In 1918 he read Freud's *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* though, undoubtedly, he had heard much of Freud and his ideas previously. It is obvious that Freud's ideas produced a great impression on Dreiser, for he began to study psychiatry and psychoanalysis. His studies in this sphere, though, were not systematic, and he could hardly have investigated deeply Freud's concept of the unconscious. Later on, Dreiser admitted that he did not understand much of the theory of psychoanalysis and that he could not follow all the

points of Freud's concept. Nevertheless, Dreiser greatly admired Freud as a brilliant scientist. Sometimes he even used Freud's terms, but often filled them with his own meaning. His article "It," which uses Freud's concept of the id, is especially demonstrative in this respect.

"Ego" and "Id," according to Freud, are the conventional signs of the conscious and unconscious formation of a person's psyche.¹ These terms present rather complicated scientific categories, the investigation of which forms the basis of psychoanalysis. Dreiser's article on the topic demonstrates that he did not understand the true meaning of Freud's terms: he used them, rather, to express his own ideas. Dreiser, for instance, mixed "Ego" and "Id" and reduced the terms to the idea he elaborates in *Notes on Life*—that is, the category of Life Force or Creative Force, managing the individual and the external world. Therefore, in his psychological researches Dreiser persistently adhered to his mechanistic, positivist theory and, in this respect, his interpretation of the theme of "desire" resembles Schopenhauer's.

Schopenhauer's doctrine gives an important role to the functions of satiety and boredom, which are produced when desire is fulfilled. The philosopher believes that possession diminishes appeal, an aspiration achieved is found out to be insignificant, and any enjoyment harbors suffering within itself. Even if a person does not attain the objects of his desire, he will experience periods of terrible emptiness and boredom. Thus, life moves like a pendulum back and forth between suffering and boredom.

It is especially important to note the tragic pessimism of Schopenhauer's outlook. Schopenhauer, in fact, invented the term "pessimism," meaning the negative attitude toward life believed to contain no happiness and in which evil and nonsense triumphed. In the *Trilogy of Desire*, the theme of pessimistic satiety and boredom, caused by desires fulfilled, occupies an important place. Cowperwood, rushing from one desire to the other, from one love intrigue to the other, never finds himself satisfied. Alternating thirsts for new sensations followed by periods of boredom dominate his nature. Dreiser's hero cannot sate his unceasing egoistic desires and for this reason he can not

be satisfied with his life or feel happy.

Dreiser's treatment of egoism as an integral part of any person's character also recalls Schopenhauer's concept of desire. Certainly, the problem of egoism excited mankind long before Schopenhauer, but he emphasizes some nuances in this problem which were especially pertinent at the turn of the century. On the one hand, Schopenhauer stresses the instinctive nature of egoism, suggesting its centrality to the struggle for existence. According to Schopenhauer, egoistic people are utilitarian, heartless, unemotional, and closer to the animal world. On the other hand, he connects egoism and desire, considering egoism as the source of desires. Schopenhauer asserts that moral qualities are inherited from nature, and that moral impulses depend not on spiritual culture but are predetermined by the world will. The person therefore practically cannot change or re-educate himself. Even if a person realizes defects or drawbacks in his nature and feels disgusted by them, even if he has the frank intention to correct himself, despite his serious intentions and honorable promises, he will, to his own surprise, appear on the same path.

Dreiser was also convinced that the qualities of character are incorporated in a person from nature, or caused by Life Force: "I am as good or ill as Life ordained me to be, neither more nor less so—an implement of it. . . . Because of Life, the mean and great, the ugly and the beautiful are and do, but not otherwise. Murderer or saint, humanist or devil through them as its mechanism, its mouthpiece, it says or does what it wills" (*Notes on Life* 255). But while Schopenhauer denies any opportunity of moral perfection, Dreiser admits some moral evolution in a person's character, though rather limited in its content.

In the first two novels of the trilogy there is practically no sign of spiritual evolution in Cowperwood, so it was especially important for Dreiser to introduce this theme in the last volume. The need for some spiritual development explains the title of *The Stoic*, pointing to changes in Cowperwood's worldview. He moves from the egoism of the financier and the titan (caring only about his own interests) to the stoicism of a person who realizes the impossibility of obtaining happiness from wealth

and prosperity and who exchanges his selfish desires for eternal human values: love and beauty.

It is interesting to note that Schopenhauer allocates three basic ethical impulses to human character: egoism, anger and compassion. Each individual possesses these impulses in various proportions. The proportions of the impulses determine a person's motives and express themselves in his actions. Egoism is an integral property of human nature, which means that for each person his own enjoyments and sufferings are paramount; but in some persons egoism prevails and reaches an extreme degree. The philosopher asserts that egoism is boundless, egoism is colossal, and egoism dominates the whole world.

Schopenhauer further maintains that egoists comprise the majority of mankind. Many people would certainly prefer the whole world's wreck to their own death; each person has the capacity to use others as the means to achieve his own purposes. Egoism thus separates people, causing hostility and tension. Schopenhauer rejects the attempts of his predecessors to prove ethics by a person's aspiration to self-preservation and to his own benefit and pleasure. He considers such morals egoistic and, hence, immoral. He finds egoistic tendencies in all religious morals which reward good acts and punish bad ones. Even in the Christian precept that demands loving others as much as one loves oneself, Schopenhauer finds elements of egoism put forward as the basis of morality. Schopenhauer considers only virtues based upon unselfishness to be truly "moral impulses."

Compassion is, according to Schopenhauer, an "unselfish" impulse because it is directed not to the person feeling it, but to other individuals. Together with compassion there exists one more force, also "disinterested" in its basis but forming an opposition with compassion, which serves as the criterion of immorality: anger. In comparison with egoists, spiteful people are even more dangerous, as they seek not their own well-being, but to bring suffering on others. Rage or anger is thus "unselfish" in its nature, making the sufferings of other people not only the consequence of egoistic acts but also the intent of a spiteful person. Anger makes a person feel happy when

someone else feels desperate.

In his trilogy Dreiser depicts society as an association of cruel and spiteful people. It is only fitting that he calls the society “hungry and bold[,] a company of gray wolves” (*The Titan* 491). Dreiser’s view of society is well represented by *The Titan*’s powerful Chicagoans such as Schryhart, Arneel, Hand, and Merrill. They are ready to destroy their enemy Frank Cowperwood at any cost. All of Dreiser’s heroes are filled with egoism. Even Berenice, his ideal heroine, possesses this quality, to say nothing of the other characters, including Frank Cowperwood himself.

Schopenhauer represents human life as an ongoing battle between the forces of egoism and rage on the one side, and compassion on the other. Dreiser also considers egoism and compassion the basic determinants of people’s actions. In this respect Dreiser consciously opposed the heroines in his first two novels, *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*. In *Carrie* the instinctive egoistic traits prevail and her type of egoism can be called “unconscious,” “instinctive,” or “intuitive.” She is not inclined to rational reflections or contemplation. She is not capable of strong feelings or high emotions. *Jennie Gerhardt*, on the contrary, is full of compassion. Her character is constructed as if according to the basic principle of Schopenhauer’s ethics: don’t damage anybody and help others as much as you can.

In the trilogy the contrast of egoism and compassion is embodied within Frank Cowperwood. In *The Financier* and *The Titan* he is moved in his actions by egoistic impulses. To characterize him, Dreiser uses adjectives such as imprudent, insolent, defiant, provocative, aggressive, cynical, ambitious, and egoistic. In *The Stoic* he moves closer to the idea of compassion. In the last novel of the trilogy Cowperwood comes to the conclusion that tremendous egoism has pushed him away from those who might become his friends. He decides to construct a hospital for the poor, and to open a picture gallery accessible to everyone. By the end of his life Cowperwood the businessman turns into a philosopher, contemplating life and meditating on such eternal categories as love, faith, and truth. He thinks about the meaning of life and death, about eternity

and beauty, about compassion.

Critics unanimously assert that the spiritual “regeneration” of Cowperwood is not artistically convincing. John Hay wrote in December 1947 that the last chapters of *The Stoic* left the impression of incompleteness and indefiniteness (737). John Lydenberg declared in his article “The Anatomy of Exhaustion” that the spiritual regenerations of Berenice and Cowperwood sounded unpersuasive, concluding that both Dreiser and his hero Frank Cowperwood were exhausted (733-34). Malcolm Cowley found many miscalculations in Dreiser’s last novel: the title was unrelated to the plot, there was no integrity or artistic unity in the description of events and characters, and there were stylistic errors. Cowley was not content with the ending of the novel or the trilogy itself (723-24).

I agree with the critics that *The Stoic* is not faultless and that its last chapters are schematical and poor from the artistic point of view. Dreiser was in a hurry and had no time to finish or polish the novel. The work over the novel cost him titanic efforts and he was writing the last pages of *The Stoic* just before his death. It is also obvious that Dreiser himself understood the artistic weaknesses of the last pages of the novel and was dissatisfied with its ending. He expressed his doubts in his December 14, 1945, letter to John Farrel: “Would you prefer, personally, to see the chapters on yoga come out of the book? If so, what would be your idea of a logical ending?” And when, in his reply, Farrel confirmed that he shared his fears about the unconvincing ending of the trilogy, Dreiser responded: “You are dead right about the last chapter in regard to Berenice” (quoted in Lingeman, *An American Journey* 474). He intended to rewrite this chapter in order to make the ending of the book more convincing. Unfortunately, Dreiser had no time to carry this out. He died on December 28, 1945.

Dreiser clearly realized the defects of the final part of *The Stoic*, yet he preferred to keep these pages despite of the risk of spoiling the novel or destroying the trilogy. His decision, in my opinion, indicates that completing the trilogy’s conception of ethics was extremely important to Dreiser. He fluently and schematically completed his ideas, even at the expense of artistic considerations. That fact lends credence to the idea that

the spiritual “regeneration” of Cowperwood was central to Dreiser’s project in the trilogy. This assumption is supported by the fact that in his 1911 novel *Jennie Gerhardt*, written and published before the trilogy, Dreiser gave priority to spiritual over material values, to love and mercy over egoism. He developed the same ideas in *The “Genius,”* published in 1915. The hero of this novel, Eugene Witla, overestimated his life’s values. He refused material success, rejected commercial art, and came back to the world of art spiritually revived for his artistic work.

Most probably the *Trilogy of Desire*, conceived at about the same time, was intended to expose Cowperwood’s ideal, “I satisfy myself,” as faulty and incapable of providing true satisfaction and happiness. As a counterbalance to Cowperwood’s egoistic views, there are the ideals of spirituality and love of people. Dreiser incorporated the capacity for spiritual regeneration into Cowperwood’s character from the very beginning. His opportunity for spiritual revival derived from the love of beauty concealed in his nature. His search for beauty in art and in love helped him to become spiritual and to reconsider his views.

The problems of art and beauty, and their influence upon morals, recur throughout Dreiser’s fiction. It is important to note that while investigating these problems Dreiser relies upon aesthetic concepts developed by Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche and, in particular, Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer writes that genuine greatness of art lies in its ethical function. In other words, art withdraws people from daily life, distracting them from their individual will, removing them from grief, suffering, and sorrow. Art immerses people in free contemplation and delivers them perfect calm and enjoyment. The greatness of art is due to the fact that it brings oblivion. As life and sufferings are identical, and the will to life is directly proportional to hopeless alarms and excitements, free contemplation of beauty liberates people from the tyranny of the will. Consciousness, when immersed in aesthetic enjoyment, turns away from its own will. When we give ourselves up to free contemplation of beauty, all our wants become quiet, our desires and troubles die away temporarily. We forget ourselves, our own wills, our lives

"full of constant suffering." The storm of life, which "rushes without any beginning and without any purpose, taking everything and carrying it away," is stopped for a moment. But Schopenhauer recognizes that enjoyment of art lasts a short time. Thus, aesthetic enjoyment brings "only temporary consolation." It does not cure, it does not give rescue.²

In his trilogy Dreiser explores the problems of art and beauty. Cowperwood's feelings in the novels shift from primitive to more developed. In art, he grows from a purely commercial interest in painting to a deep and professional understanding and true enjoyment of it. In love, Cowperwood's interest in women becomes increasingly artistic and original. His final love for Berenice—a young, beautiful, and spiritual woman—symbolizes Cowperwood's attainment of an ideal feeling as the result of his long spiritual search.

In *The Stoic* Dreiser's understanding of beauty is echoed by Berenice, who symbolizes a certain ideal synthesis of external beauty and high spirituality. She is delighted with the peculiar "irrational," "useless" beauty of medieval Gothic cathedrals in Rochester and Canterbury. Majestic architecture of the past—spires, towers, heavy arches—awakens in Berenice "something almost aloof," a "mentally contemplative grace which brushed aside the tang of that pagan modernity which at other times gave her the force and glare of red flower in a gray rock" (186).

In comparison to Berenice, Cowperwood is burdened with rather earthly desires: to enrich his capital, to win in his struggle against his business competitors. He is not capable of understanding her enthusiastic reaction to beauty. While looking at the ancient temples, he is surprised with the "futility" of this beauty. Art does not touch his soul, it does not awaken his conscience. Art functions now only as one of the means of Cowperwood's enrichment, of his commercial success.

This English episode is important for the philosophical meaning of the novel, for in this episode Dreiser contrasts Berenice's "true" and Cowperwood's "false" understanding of beauty. Only by understanding beauty can Dreiser's heroes come to comprehend the true meaning of an individual life.

Perfect as she seems to be, Berenice herself passes through a period of spiritual evolution. She makes the decision to

change her life after Cowperwood's death, which has put an end to all her ambitious hopes. Berenice's spiritual regeneration begins when she learns about aspects of life she had never before considered. Social contrasts between the rich and the poor, such as the extreme poverty of workers' lives in India and America, finally cause her to turn away from her former ambitious desires. Dreiser bases Berenice's regeneration upon the idea of compassion.

Dreiser, of course, was not a professional philosopher and he did not set himself the task of looking deeply into the essence and terminology of philosophical doctrines. The writer's well-known bent for philosophy could probably be explained by his desire to find in the works of authoritative philosophers confirmation for his own conjectures and hypotheses. This fact might account for Dreiser's superficial approach to different philosophical theories, for his careless study of some aspects of those theories which did not interest him. It also explains the inconsistency of his philosophic orientation, of which critics have long accused him. It was simply Dreiser's ardent but often unsatisfied desire to understand life, to solve the riddles of existence, that made him study works by many well-known philosophers, trying to find in their concepts the confirmation for his own views and ideas.

Notes

¹ See Sigmund Freud, *Das "Ich" und das "Es."*

² See Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung.*

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Thesis and (Ant)ithesis: Dreiser's “McEwen of the Shining Slave Makers” and the Game of Life

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“What is it all but a trouble of ants in the gleam of a
million million of suns?”

— Vastness,” Alfred Tennyson (1885)

Interpretations of Dreiser’s first published short story, “The Shining Slave Makers,” and its revision “McEwen of the Shining Slave Makers,” have tended to focus on the question of whether it should be viewed as an expression of harsh and egotistical Darwinism, as a celebration of self-sacrifice and cooperation, or as an interlinking of the two. However, while the place of egoism and altruism within the story is important, I believe that this issue has obscured a broader and more important theme in the work: that of life as a game between antithetical powers.

Dreiser began work on the story in 1899 (Pizer 194), and it was accepted by *Ainslee’s* in 1900, appearing in 1901. The story was then revised for a 1918 republication in *Free and Other Stories*. Fourteen years after its republication, Dorothy Dudley took the lead in arguing that the story was an embodiment of a harsh, Darwinistic philosophy (153). This interpretation was further elaborated by, among others, Robert Elias. Despite the obvious struggle and death which occur in the story, though, there is also cooperation and self-sacrifice, as was most notably brought to the fore by Ellen Moers. The next significant development in criticism of the story came with the

beginning of a rapprochement between the previously opposing camps. Donald Pizer's interpretation of the story, for example, combines elements of both Elias' and Moers' readings by suggesting that, at least to Dreiser, self-sacrifice and the survival of the fittest are somehow compatible.

In the most recent consideration of the story, Louis Zanine demonstrates how Dreiser, after reading Herbert Spencer in 1894, discovered a way to combine consistently the two elements of selflessness and selfishness within a Darwinian framework. Yet even assuming that Zanine's thoughtful interpretation is sufficient to lay to rest the decades-old debate over the primacy of selfishness or selflessness, he still neglects Dreiser's belief, reflected in his first published story, in the inherently antithetical and game-like nature of life .

Zanine and others have pointed out that the idea of life's being a game between contrasting forces appears frequently in Dreiser's thought (186). Rolph Lunden has explored the antithetical pattern of Dreiser's thought as it is revealed in the novels, and he states that this pattern "can even be traced back as far as the nineties" (44). But Lunden then concludes that it is "only latent and embryonic" prior to 1903 (59), and he does not devote attention to Dreiser's first published story.

Lunden greatly underestimates the prominence and complexity of Dreiser's "Law of Contrast" during the nineties. And Zanine's interpretation of the work, like those of previous critics, does not take into account the significance of this concept to Dreiser's philosophy. The relationship between egoism and altruism in both versions of Dreiser's story is but one of many oppositional pairings in Dreiser's larger conception of life as a game. Moreover, this more generalized and fundamental notion of life as a game between vast antithetical forces is, in fact, the most important theme expressed in Dreiser's ant parable.

Significantly, Dreiser repeatedly expresses the idea that life is a game in connection with ants. An extended contemplation of this theme can be found among his *Notes on Life*. Here, Dreiser writes:

Nature surely could provide enough food and shelter
for ants without war and strife—yet . . . they occupy,

they must be preyed on by all sorts of insects struggling for life and subsistence, and more, by rivals of their own or related species—murder and sudden death, battles, slaves, endless work to gather a store of food and protect the same, reproduce their species, care for and feed the young. In fact, in order that they may have the minute life that they have, there must be struggle, adventure, contest, enmity and friendship, love and hate, greed and charity, waste and want, safety and uncertainty, ignorance and knowledge, courage and fear—in fact all of the things that go to make a good game, and the enjoyment of the same. Else no ant life and so no ants. And in place of the word *ant* you may write . . . every creature that has ever reached the state where collectively it sought to live, reproduce, and enjoy itself as a living organism. (187)

Thus, Dreiser finds the life of ants to be richly illustrative of all life, and he chooses the ant as an ideal symbol of the “game” between opposing forces that makes life itself possible.

In another reflection on the opposing forces in nature, Dreiser again considers the ant, this time in relation to its insect rival, the “ant lion.” Dreiser observes the insect in his garden and describes how it busies itself with the “labor of digging a small pit in which to trap unwary ants” for food (*Notes* 237). Dreiser then writes at length on the exquisite care the ant lion takes in the construction of this conical trap. Later, Dreiser comments on the elaborate game-like strategies which are employed by both sides in the battle “for the privilege of living and being” (237). Dreiser wonders again

. . . at the primal source of so much aggressive planning and slaying on the part of creatures of all types and descriptions which are required to kill and eat in order to live, and that at the same time indulge in so much defensive preparation in order that they may not be slain and eaten. (238)

Dreiser is also concerned with the rough equilibrium which seems to exist in the battle for life. He notes that “a hungry and . . . predatory animal is by great nature provided with prey, or food,” reasoning that

This seems to imply cosmic cruelty as well as (by antithesis) cosmic mercy, but neither may be involved. The life process—to be at all—may necessitate both, and the sum of one may balance the sum of the other. (239)

This idea of an equation between forces is tediously elaborated in Dreiser's essay "Equation Inevitable," published two years after the revision of his ant story. Here, Dreiser relates the idea of an equilibrium between opposing forces to ants yet again:

. . . a "dependent equation" as Spencer . . . term[ed] it, will always be attained between individuals assembled in vast numbers. . . . If one reads chemistry and physics correctly it is a condition which underlies everything. . . . Indeed there is scarcely any doubt that social life as we know it will yet need to be organized upon an even more closely balanced scale than at present, since the elements which make for contest and self-defense are becoming more numerous. . . . It is now by certain orders of men and insects; the bee-hive and the ant-colony offer suggestions. (169)

Not only did Dreiser adopt the idea that life was a game in which opposing forces reached a rough balance or equation, even before he composed his first short story for publication, he also repeatedly and consistently associated the concept with ants throughout his other writings. It is further evident that Dreiser believed this idea to be scientifically well-founded and philosophically significant.

Dreiser believed the antithetical nature of life was demonstrated by science, writing that "the enormous revelations of Science in regard to nature indicate a necessary balancing of forces, which at one point of man's limited grasp appear evil and at another point good, but, in order to achieve . . . life, both of which are necessary" (*Notes* 242). Indeed, his conclusion that "life as we know it is compounded of opposites" and that "there can be no sense of life without them" (266) is the greatest single insight he gained from his years of reading in the sciences:

Truly the endless variety of life . . . puzzled me to the point of reading Darwin, Haeckel, Spencer, Loeb . . . a long list. In fact I spent three solid years informing myself as to their views and conclusions, as well as those of many, many others, which . . . led to . . . my personal conclusion . . . that *contrast*, however attractive or disagreeable, joyful to many, or terrible to others . . . was apparently indispensable to this life and world process if we are to have life as we know it. (*Notes* 328)

Given the importance Dreiser attached to this interpretation of life, and the frequency with which he associated the idea with ants, it would be surprising if Dreiser did *not* make it the basis of a story which revolved around those very creatures.

Even the events occurring near the time of his story's composition may well have contributed to Dreiser's choice of idea. The story's concern with opposing forces contending over territory was certainly apropos, as the Spanish-American War had taken place only the year before. Dreiser himself lost a friend to the conflict, William Louis Sonntag, Jr., who died from a fever contracted while reporting on the situation in Cuba (Moers 40). Dreiser's revision of the story, during the final period of World War I, was also appropriately timed; world events once again seemed to be mirroring Dreiser's own theories about the necessity of struggle in life.

A more immediate source of ideas and details for his story was his scientific reading. As Ellen Moers has pointed out, many technical terms in the story, such as Dreiser's reference to the ant species *sanguinea* and *fusca*, are derived from works by the entomologist John Lubbock (337). Moers also suggests that other terms "—Lucidi, Schauffusi—seem to have been fancifully derived from unrelated names in *The Descent of Man*" (337). However, Moers is incorrect in this regard. *Formica schauffusi* is an actual species of ant, as is *Formica pratensis*, also mentioned by Dreiser. Not surprisingly, when an editor charges that the original version of his story lacks entomological accuracy, Dreiser angrily responds that "the thing is scientifically correct according to Lubbock and I have the volume and page to show for it" (*Letters* 46).¹

In addition to information about the ability of ants to eject poison (Lubbock 15), Dreiser also took details of ant combat from John Lubbock's *Ants, Bees, and Wasps*. Lubbock describes how, when fighting, ants "have the instinct of acting together, three or four seizing an enemy at once" before "[o]ne of them then jumps on her back and cuts, or rather saws, off her head" (17-18). Lubbock also writes, "I have often observed that some of my ants had the heads of others hanging on to their legs for a considerable time" (97). Similarly, Dreiser writes that McEwen "clambered on the back of Og, at whose neck he began to saw with his powerful teeth" ("McEwen" 106), and he describes the red ants as bearing "upon their legs the severed heads of the poor blacks who had been slain in the defense of their home, and whose jaws still clung to their foes, fixed in the rigor of death" (104).

More important, however, are the details which Dreiser takes from Charles Darwin and adapts to express the theme of life as a balancing game between antithetical forces. For example, Darwin describes how he observed part of an attack by *Formica sanguinea* on a colony of *Formica fusca*, as several of the latter "were rushing about in the greatest agitation, and one was perched motionless with its own pupa in its mouth on the top of a spray of heath, an image of despair over its ravaged home" (*Origin* 208). Similarly, in his description of a raid made by Ermi and McEwen on a colony of weaker ants, Dreiser describes how

Numbers hung from the topmost blades of the towering sword-trees, and the broad, floor-like leaves of the massive weeds . . . holding in their jaws baby larvae and cocoons rescued from the invaders. ("McEwen" 111)

Here, Darwin's "image of despair" becomes, for Dreiser, an image of the fragile equilibrium between various antithetical forces: each defending ant is now a living fulcrum between the future generation held aloft in their jaws and the death present below their feet—and all balanced upon a leaf-top.

Another example of Dreiser's scientific borrowings, this time from Herbert Spencer, can be seen, particularly at the beginning of the story, in his emphasis on the sweltering heat.

Significantly, in accordance with his desire to make explicit the ultimate physical basis of his speculations, Spencer writes:

If we ask whence come these physical forces from which, through the intermediation of the vital forces, the social forces arise, the reply is . . . the solar radiations. . . . The assertion is a startling one, and by many will be thought ludicrous; but it is an unavoidable deduction which cannot here be passed over. (219-20)

Dreiser's own story begins with an August sun that has "faded the once sappy green leaves of the trees to a dull and dusty hue," while the grass was "sere and dry where the light had fallen unbroken" ("McEwen" 99). Even Dreiser's opening description of the effects of the "parching rays of a summer sun" ("McEwen" 99), then, may well owe something to the influence of Herbert Spencer. Robert McEwen's first action is to take shelter from the sun, and heat is mentioned repeatedly throughout the story.

Both Darwin and Spencer draw attention to the importance of temperature to the development of ants' young. Darwin writes that ants "move . . . their own eggs and cocoons, into warm parts of the nest, in order that they may be quickly hatched (*Descent* 187), while Spencer explains that "the hatching of their eggs is determined by temperature" and "the evolution of the pupa . . . may be immensely accelerated or retarded according as heat is artificially supplied or withheld" (211). Such passages parallel Dreiser's description of the care of the communal young within the ant colony: "Larvae and chrysalis . . . were moved to and fro between the rooms where the broken sunlight warmed, and the shadow gave them rest ("McEwen" 109). Consequently, Spencer's reduction of social forces to their source in the energy of solar radiations is absorbed by Dreiser and becomes the basis of yet more antitheses within the story—sun/shade, heat/cool. Most importantly, Dreiser here makes clear that for the ants' offspring to develop and survive, it is necessary that an equilibrium be carefully established between these antithetical forces.

The theme that life is a game between antagonistic elements is suggested in the story, as well, by Dreiser's

description of characters. Writing elsewhere of this theme, Dreiser explains the importance of vanity in members of opposing sides in life:

In any game—and *Life is a game*—pride enters as an element necessary for victory. . . . Each . . . individual member of a side wishes to prove not only his importance but his superiority as a contestant over all other contestants. Without such spirit or vanity . . . no game would be worth seeing. (*Notes* 186)

Thus, when Ermi describes a near-death encounter with the enemy as “Nothing much,” the reader quickly learns that McEwen’s friend, “fighter that he was, had also a touch of vanity” (108). Ermi’s vanity, or “spirit,” then, helps to make Dreiser’s story about the game of life “worth seeing.” Also, Dreiser’s description of McEwen emphasizes contrasts. McEwen is “made bold by hunger and yet cautious by danger” (101). Similarly, McEwen falls “rapidly into a helpless lassitude from . . . hunger” (102), yet he must shake “himself out of” the “torpor which . . . seized on him with his eating” (103). Only between the extremes of boldness and caution, hunger and fullness, can McEwen act.

The concept of life as game between opposing forces is further embodied in Dreiser’s use of images evocative of chess or checkers throughout the work. For example, McEwen’s sense of tribal belonging is reinforced to him when he encounters “a strange column” of “red warriors” (104). Not only are the warriors arranged in a column, but their color, red as opposed to black, further establishes them as living checker pieces in a game of life and death. And, just as in chess the capture of the king is never actually performed and remains symbolic or is impossible, resulting in a “drawn” game, so the opposition of cosmic forces is unending and tends toward a rough equilibrium. Synthesis is therefore impossible, and there remains only the eternal game between thesis and antithesis.

In view of the importance of the idea of life as a game to Dreiser’s thought, the number of times he associates this idea specifically with ants, the events surrounding his composition of the story, the use to which Dreiser puts the details borrowed

from scientific sources, and the selection of images and metaphors relating to games found throughout the story, it would be a mistake to interpret his first published work as solely, or even primarily, about the connection between selfish and cooperative impulses. Rather, this concern is one aspect of a much broader and more profound theme articulated in the story—a theme which remained central to Dreiser's thought throughout his life.

After McEwen's dream, the antithesis of reality, he gazes at the world within a world at his feet, and Dreiser poses the question:

What was this?—a revelation of the spirit and significance of a lesser life or of his own—or what?
And what was life if the strange passions, moods and necessities which conditioned him here could condition those there on so minute a plane? (114)

Dreiser's answer to these questions, though tinged with “sorrow” (115), is tempered with wonder—even admiration—for the balance and complexity of the game that is life. It is the very variety and contrast of forces which make life so darkly alluring. Unlike the speaker in Tennyson's poem, then, Dreiser is not overcome by the minuteness of life in comparison with the vastness of space. Rather, such an antithesis of scale only lends more variety. With Darwin, Dreiser can marvel that, in consideration of its size, “the brain of an ant is one of the most marvellous atoms of matter in the world, perhaps more marvellous than the brain of man” (*Descent* 145).

Notes

¹ Even the name of the story's protagonist may have been taken from an actual Robert McEwen. Born in Cleveland in 1888, Robert McEwen earned a doctoral degree in zoology in 1917 and spent time at Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory (*Who* 271), the same laboratory at which Loeb worked and which Dreiser visited on more than one occasion. In addition, McEwen's work on the tropistic tendencies of *Drosophila* is referred to twice in Loeb's *Forced Movements, Tropisms, and Animal Conduct* (111, 116), a work which greatly interested Dreiser. It is unclear, however, how Dreiser might have come by the rather unusual name of Robert McEwen as early as

1899, and my personal conversation with Robert McEwen's son could shed little light on this curious coincidence. I can only suggest the possibility that Dreiser met Robert's father, William McEwen, while searching for work in Cleveland in 1894.

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Reviews

Robertson, Michael. *Stephen Crane, Journalism, and the Making of Modern Literature.* New York: Columbia U P, 1997. 253 pp. \$45, hardback; \$16.50, paperback.

Michael Robertson's excellent book on Stephen Crane's journalism is one of the best critical studies of this author to appear in recent decades. It is valuable for the simple reason that it reveals, with admirable order and clarity, certain things we need to know about journalistic practices in the 1890s in order to understand fully certain features of Crane's narrative art and its influence on later writers.

It is a commonplace of literary history that Crane uncannily anticipated the styles, forms, and attitudes of the brilliant modernist fiction of the 1920s; but historians, nearly a hundred years after his death, are still challenged to provide a full and clear explanation of the cultural events that enabled him to reject wholesale the literary forms and practices of the past and to appear suddenly as a master of startling new methods and styles—phenomena H. G. Wells characterized in his prophetic obituary essay (July, 1900) as “enormous repudiations” marking “the first expression of the opening mind of a new period.” Robertson is one of many scholars who have engaged this issue over the years, and his thoughtful and knowledgeable book places him high in the ranks of the best.

Older historians (Spiller, Berryman, Stallman) ascribed Crane's startling originality to his genius for picking and choosing from disparate strands of the literary culture of his time precisely what he needed for his unique creative purposes. In their view, his newspaper writings were more or less potboilers, rigidly fixed in the lowly subgenres of journalism, valuable chiefly for whatever sidelights they might throw on his “serious” literary productions. Later historians like Larzer Ziff

(1960), Ellen Moers (1969), and Shelley Fishkin (1985) worked from similar assumptions. In Fishkin's view, for example, Dreiser, Hemingway, Dos Passos, and other writers who began as newspaper reporters acquired from their experience certain powers of realistic observation, but they achieved literary fame because they were able to bring to these powers the poet's imaginative vision and linguistic daring, stylistic features altogether independent of their experience as newspaper writers. In this view, Crane's journalism, though useful in training exact observation, is an inferior order of writing that novelists and poets usually abandon when they achieve success as writers of "high" literature.

Robertson's view is different. Crane's revolutionary departure from contemporary literary norms (as represented by Howells and James in Robertson's study) was a reaction to certain dynamics relating to the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction in the journalism of the 1890s. Writing at a time before journalism adopted the constraining ideal of reportorial objectivity, Crane made no particular distinction between the newspaper feature story and fiction. The Sunday papers of the 1890s, in which he published most of his writing, were an indiscriminate combination of news stories, "human interest" anecdotes, and fiction, a mixture that "had an indeterminate truth status," since there were no clear lines between fact or fiction, truth or fabrication. Exploring the "discursive terrain" opened up by these oscillations and meldings of truth and fact, Crane helped to clear the way for Dreiser, Hemingway, Dos Passos, and other American writer-journalists who shaped twentieth-century modernism.

Robertson believes, and compels his readers to believe, that our unfamiliarity with the fact-fiction discourse of late nineteenth-century journalism has led not only to a distorted idea about Crane's contribution to the history of modern literature but to critical neglect of some of his best writing. Knowing nothing of the open "discursive terrain" in which he worked and prejudiced by inflexible genre categorization, readers have failed to recognize the high literary quality of much of his newspaper writing, dismissing it as mere workaday journalism, useful in some instances for the light it sheds on his

“literary” works but unworthy in itself of serious critical consideration. Robertson’s re-reading of them in the context of the fact-fiction discourse in which they were created reveals features of Crane’s narrative structures that have either been undervalued or overlooked altogether.

Crane’s earliest published New York *Tribune* articles about the fabulous exploits of hunters and fishers in the wilds of Sullivan County, New York, seem to take on new meaning in this perspective. Though they bear datelines like regular news stories, their placement on the page with various fictional pieces tends to make their truth status ambiguous. This ambiguity is reinforced by the writer’s narrative method, which further explores the question of their truth in the manner of their telling. “The fact-fiction discourse of the new journalism,” Robertson comments, “enabled Crane, whose mature work has been praised by postmodern critics, to consider the nature of narrative truth from the beginning of his career.”

Viewing Crane’s late “War Memories” (1899) from the same perspective yields fascinating new insights into his narrative art. This richly resonant composition on the problematics of language, experience, perception, and truth has been accorded almost no critical attention, though its revolutionary narrative method compels us, once duly regarded, to see it as one of Crane’s most powerful works. As in *The Red Badge of Courage*, its narrative structure is shaped by the somewhat random, halting, and at times bewildered workings of an individual mind remembering, as best it can, the inexplicable experiences of war. A voiceless interlocutor intrudes occasionally with questions and demands that complicate the narrator’s attempt to make sense of his experience. The narrator, unable to find the meaning of war in the bald facts of the engagements he has witnessed, repeatedly drifts into subjective anecdotes about trivial and mundane matters, like the more “emphatic” significance of losing his toothbrush. The telling irony and vivid imagery for which Crane is famous are amplified in “War Memories” by his mastery of a complex narrative structure, a structure so innovative that Robertson ventures a speculation that it might have marked a new phase in Crane’s writing career had he not died a few months after he

wrote it.

Robertson's commentary on "War Memories" will undoubtedly send many readers back to this marvelous piece, as well as to other of Crane's newspaper articles; and what Robertson has taught us about the important influence on Crane's art of the truth-fact discourse of the 1890s will enable us to see it, and other important journalistic writings, in a new and valuable light.

— James B. Colvert

Brief Mention

Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. Ed. John C. Berkey, Alice M. Winters, James L.W. West III, and Neda M. Westlake. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1998. New introduction by Thomas P. Riggio. 529 pp. \$19.95, paperback.

The republication of the Pennsylvania edition of *Sister Carrie* is worth noting for several reasons, not least among which is the novel's approaching centennial. Its sleeker new incarnation is another—it is a more manageable book, 150 pages shorter and minus a large percentage of the critical apparatus found in the 1981 text. All the Textual Commentary and Textual Apparatus have been excised, as well as some of the Historical Commentary, leaving (in addition to the novel's text) only Maps and Historical Notes, perhaps to make the volume more manageable, less forbidding to those who are not specialists in textual matters. In any case, the new volume is an attractive one, though the 1981 version will remain crucial for scholars and teachers needing access to more technical details. The final change is a succinct, powerful introduction by Thomas P. Riggio that accomplishes admirably in less than nine pages a number of tasks. It summarizes the novel's history, factual as well as apocryphal, in a way that will quickly orient new readers of *Sister Carrie*; it establishes once again the novel's preeminent importance in American literary history; and it recounts the history of the Pennsylvania edition's text in a

manner designed to clarify the textual issues without further polarizing scholars who prefer either the 1900 or the 1981 text. As Riggio concludes his introduction, "Readers should feel no need to choose between the two versions. The Pennsylvania edition has become a significant part of the history of *Sister Carrie*. It also exists as a novel that deserves to be read independently of its other incarnations. As such it can be studied, pondered, judged, and enjoyed for its own merits."

— Nancy Warner Barrineau

Eastman, Yvette. *Dearest Wilding: A Memoir.* Ed. with an introduction by Thomas P. Riggio. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1998. 220 pp. \$15, paperback.

This ground-breaking memoir treats the sixteen-year relationship between Theodore Dreiser and Yvette Szekely (who later married Max Eastman) which began when she was 16, he 58, and was consummated less than a year later. When it was originally published in 1995, the *New York Times Book Review* called it "as clear-eyed as anything penned by the celebrated American realist she loved, yet remarkably open-hearted and forgiving." Half of the book is Eastman's memoir, the other Dreiser's letters to her between 1929 and 1945. There is no question of this volume's importance. Yvette Eastman, because she entered Dreiser's life at such a young age, is one of the last living voices to record her impressions of Dreiser and those who moved around him. And, of course, their respective ages raise questions at once fascinating and disturbing about the man Dreiser was, questions that readers of this book will want to answer for themselves. A new paperback edition should bring this important study even more attention than it has already received.

— Nancy Warner Barrineau